

# Plan would allow US to boost auto mileage standards

By John Crawley *Fri Apr 28, 2006*

A proposal in Congress would give the Bush administration authority it seeks to amend fuel economy standards for compacts, sedans and other passenger cars to cut oil consumption, officials said on Friday.

The legislation being drafted by the House Energy and Commerce Committee does not mandate specific mileage targets. Any changes also would not likely take effect for at least two years in order to give auto companies -- especially big U.S. manufacturers struggling financially -- time to absorb a new standard.

A hearing on the plan is scheduled for May 3 and one congressional aide called the proposal a starting point for discussion.

Republican Sen. Ted Stevens (news, bio, voting record) of Alaska, a crucial voice on reforming fuel economy regulations as chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, also said he supported changing the Corporate Average Fuel Economy standard as proposed by President George W. Bush on Thursday.

And Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (news, bio, voting record), a New York Republican and chairman of the House Science Committee, said he planned to propose an amendment to energy legislation that would boost fuel economy. His office said details were under discussion.

In March, the Bush administration approved a 1.9 mpg increase in the standards for sport utilities, minivans and pickups -- all in the light truck class that includes big gas guzzlers -- to 24.1 mpg between 2008 and 2011. It also rewrote the rules for calculating how far light trucks must go on a gallon of gasoline.

But transportation planners have long resisted changing targets for sedans and other passenger cars, wary of increasing industry costs, especially with domestic auto giants Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Corp. in financial trouble.

The passenger car standard has remained the same since 1990.

Now under severe political pressure from soaring gasoline prices that have topped \$3 in many markets, the administration has changed its mind on cars.

Prompted by Bush, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta formally asked House and Senate leaders on Thursday for authority to overhaul the mileage goal for that class of vehicle as well as the method for calculating it.

Currently each manufacturers' fleet of passenger cars must average 27.5 miles per gallon. But many vehicles, including those made by U.S. manufacturers not known for fuel-saving models, exceed the current standard.

Consumer and environmental groups were mixed on the administration's about-face.

The Union of Concerned Scientists said changing the way fuel savings are calculated -- as was done with the light truck class -- could create loopholes for manufacturers to produce bigger, less efficient cars.

"If Congress is going to grant the president authority to revamp car fuel economy targets, (lawmakers) must also include a requirement that an oil savings guarantee be attached to any changes," the group said in a statement.

Joan Claybrook, president of consumer group Public Citizen and the nation's top auto regulator in the early years of the CAFE law, said significant savings could be achieved quickly by reducing engine weight.

Automakers said they would work with the administration on any proposed changes.